The current state of Higher Education Museums, Galleries and Collections in the UK

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Resumo

Este artigo pretende efectuar um ponto da situação actual dos museus, galerias e colecções universitárias no Reino Unido através de uma série de estudos recentes sobre questões de gestão e recenseamentos de colecções. Em particular, apresentar-se-ão algumas formas inovadoras de colaboração entre instituições, bem como de alargamento de públicos.

Abstract

The paper will summarise the current state of the UK's higher education museums, galleries and collections (HEMGCs) by drawing on recent surveys of collections and management issues. In particular the paper will highlight some of the innovative ways in which HEMGCs have been working in partnership with others and broadening their audiences.

In this paper I would like to present some of the findings of a recently-completed national survey of all higher education museums, galleries and collections (HEMGCs) in the UK. A number of common themes emerge, many of which paint a rather depressing picture, in particular of the state of the small departmental collections which constitute the great majority of university collections. Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs of a slow renaissance of university museums in some areas, which are beginning to redefine their role both within the university and beyond.

History

As we all know, from their earliest times, but particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, collections were fundamental to the teaching and research of universities. David Murray, in his 1904 book, *Museums, their history and their use*, wrote:

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> "Every Professor of a branch of science requires a museum and a laboratory for his department; and accordingly in all our great universities we have independent museums of botany, palaeontology, geology, mineralogy, and zoology, of anatomy, physiology, pathology and materia medica, of archaeology – prehistoric and historic, classical and Christian – each subject taught having its own appropriate collection" (quoted in DRYSDALE 1990: 14).

Specimen-based teaching – and hence the importance of university collections – continued on well into the second half of the 20th century. However, problems really began to emerge in the UK in the 1970s as a result of a funding crisis when universities had their budgets cut by the government. This co-incided with gradual changes in teaching methods in many subjects, which shifted away from collections-based learning. Some university museums closed, other teaching collections were dispersed, many were neglected and suffered as a result.

The 1986 Museums Association conference highlighted what was by then becoming a crisis in university museums and collections: Alan Warhurst,

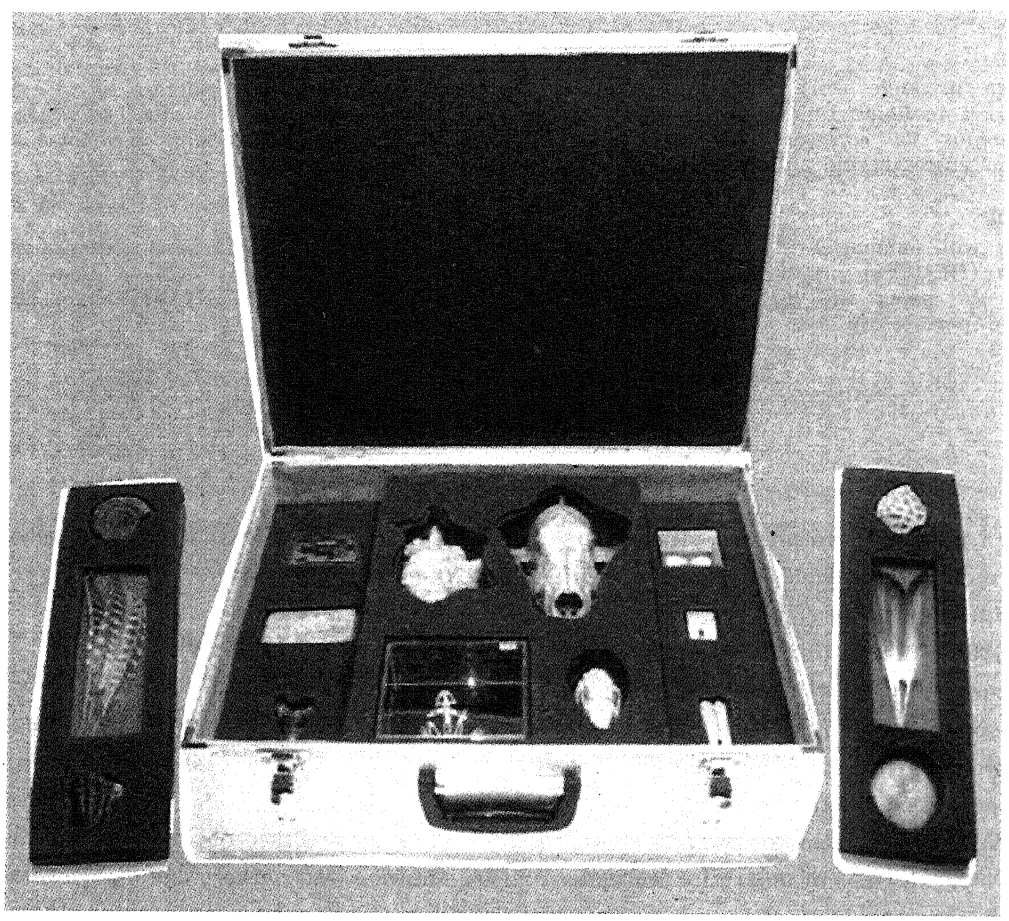

Fig. 1 - A 'loan box' of zoological material for use by local schools. UCL museum studies students have been used to develop a series of such boxes for its collections. They are made available together with teaching notes which show how they support school curriculum objectives (Photo courtesy Grant Museum of Zoology, UCL).

Director of the Manchester Museum, one of the leading university museums, argued that university museums suffered from a triple crisis (WARHURST 1986: 137): 1) a crisis of identity and purpose; 2) a crisis of recognition (by universities and by the wider society); and 3) a crisis of resources.

Responding to this crisis, the Museums and Galleries Commission, which was then the government's adviser on museums, called on the Area Museum Councils (regional support bodies for museums) to survey the collections held by universities in their regions.

In 1987 another significant step was taken with the formation of the University Museums Group, which was developed to give university museums a common voice in matters of advocacy and policy-making. Up until recently, however, membership was restricted to the directors of the main, well-established university museums (such as those in Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester) and so the smaller collections were un-represented.

The first survey of university collections was that of the collections of the University of London, and was published in 1989 (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1989). This was followed by surveys of Scotland in 1990 (DRYSDALE 1990) and Northern England in 1993 (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1993). There was then a hiatus for a few years followed by a concerted push in the late 1990s (no doubt consequent upon the impending demise of the Museums and Galleries Commission which had originally instigated the surveys), with reports on six other regions completed in the last two years (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1999, ARNOLD-FORSTER & WEEKS 2000, ARNOLD-FORSTER & WEEKS 2001, COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS IN WALES 2000, NORTHERN IRELAND MUSEUMS COUNCIL 2001, SOUTH WEST MUSEUMS COUNCIL 1999). This means that there are now nine reports available which provide complete coverage of the UK's university museums and collections[1].

1999 also saw the publication of two other significant reports, *The Management of Higher Education Museums, Galleries and Collections in the UK* (KELLY 1999), which examined the various ways in which HEMGCs are managed, and *Partners and Providers: the Role of Higher Education Institutions in the provision of cultural and sports facilities to the wider public* (BENNETT *et al.* 1999), which examined the ways in which HEIs are providing facilities beyond their own core university clientele.

The results of the surveys

I shall now to turn to the main substance of this paper, which is to summarise the main findings of these nine reports.

Statistics

- There are over 400 HEMGCs in the UK.
- 90 of these are registered as museums by Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.
- In England, 15 HEMGCs are 'Designated' as holding collections of national and international importance, and receive special government project funding in recognition of this[2].
- 32 HEMGCs in England receive special funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board,

[1] Many of the reports have been written individually or jointly by Kate Arnold-Forster and Jane Weeks, who deserve a huge amount of credit for raising awareness of the plight of university museums and collections across the country, as well as highlighting progress made and ways forward for the future. I am happy to acknowledge their influence here, and my debt to their work in this paper.
[2] The designation scheme does not operate in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

which recently took over the scheme of special funding for university museums and galleries from the Higher Education Funding Council for England[3].

Common themes

Diversity

One of the clearest conclusions to emerge from the surveys is that there is a great diversity within the sector. As we can see from the statistics above, some 90 institutions qualify as museums under the registration scheme, meaning that over 300 others are not museums in the sense in which the public would understand them. This means that some 75% of the sector is occupied by collections which are not sufficiently accessible or well managed to meet the minimum official criteria for a museum. Of these, only 32 (in England) receive special funding in recognition of the role that they play. This divide between the 'museums' and 'the collections' is fundamental and colours all of the reports.

At one end of the spectrum, there are the large public museums such as the Manchester Museum, the Ashmolean Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum, which have a large staff, a budget of several million pounds, their own dedicated buildings, and most of the services that would be expected from a great public museum. At the other end of the spectrum there is, for example, the Mining Engineering Collection in the Department of Chemical, Environmental and Mining Engineering in the University of Nottingham, which consists of 33 miners' safety lamps dating to the 19th and 20th centuries housed in the staff common room (ARNOLD-FORSTER & WEEKS 2000: 44). It has not been added to since 1985 and no-one is specifically in charge of the collection. This is not in fact the smallest collection revealed in the surveys, which showed a range from over 2 million specimens to just ten items.

This diversity make generalisation difficult, and because the majority of collections are the small departmental ones, the contribution of the larger museums tends to be under-emphasised when generalisations are made. This has to be borne in mind when considering the rather pessimistic conclusions of this overview.

The Impact of Changes in Teaching

All of the surveys found that in many subjects, changes in teaching methods have had a severe impact on collections. In biology, many departments have seen a switch away from whole organism teaching to genetics, which has led to a neglect of formerly heavily-used teaching collections (DRYSDALE 1990: 17). Similarly, departments of anatomy and pathology in some universities have moved to computer-based teaching methods and have disposed of their teaching specimens (COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS IN WALES 2000: 10). A Pathology Museums Group was formed in 1991 (TURK 1994) to try to find new homes for these redundant specimens, but nevertheless there have been instances where historic specimens have been simply thrown away.

The picture very much varies between universities and from department to department. There are, for example, still some biology departments that actively teach with specimens, and in departments of geology and archaeology, collections-based teaching is still used. However, it is fair to say that collections are used

[3] No similar scheme of funding exists for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

much less than they were in the past, and that only small sub-sets of the collections are ever actively used in teaching. Teaching has clearly been the main rationale for universities having collections, so changes in teaching practice which lead to a diminution of emphasis on collections can have severe consequences.

Lack of financial resources

The surveys found that the great majority of collections do not have a dedicated budget. For example, the survey of the Midlands region found that of a total of 48 collections, less than 20% have one (Arnold-Forster & Weeks 2000: 15). This naturally severely limits the ability of most collections to undertake any improvements.

Shortage of specialist staff

Another consequence of the under-resourcing of HEMGCs is an acute shortage of specialist staff to work in them. The majority of collections have no trained member of curatorial staff, and in many cases no-one at all has responsibility for the collections. In Wales, for example, there were found to be 22 university collections, but only two of them had full-time professional staff (Council of Museums in Wales 2000: 11-12).

Lack of clear structure of governance

Many university museums and collections do not have a clear place within the university management hierarchy. Few have direct reporting lines to the university's highest governing body, and for most, accountability is informal and runs through the heads of department. This in turn makes collections reliant on the goodwill of particular individuals, or vulnerable to unsupportive ones.

Lack of planning, policy and strategy

While many of the university museums that are open to the public on a regular basis – especially the larger ones – have forward plans, acquisition and disposal policies and strategies for improvement, the vast majority of university collections do not, and 'management' is a term alien to them (Kelly 1999: 37-39).

Lack of clear purpose and role within the university

All of the above is a reflection of one of the most fundamental problems affecting many HEMGCs, which is that many universities are unsure why they actually have them. As we have seen, nearly all were established to support teaching and research, but often the teaching role has declined, and the collections are not frequently used for research. Without a clear vision of their purpose within the university's structure, many university museums and collections can become extremely vulnerable in times of scarce resources, particularly if they do not have strong advocates within the university (Arnold-Forster & Weeks 2001: 22-3).

Low standards of collections management

From this general uncertainty as to purpose flow many of the problems besetting HEMGCs in the UK. Inadequate resourcing is the first consequence, which in turn leads to one of the most consistent problems revealed in the surveys over the last decade, which is low standards of collections management. Inadequate storage, poor security, minimal or non-existent documentation, and large conservation backlogs, particularly regarding such things as the 'topping up' of specimens stored in spirit, have all led to permanent depredations to

collections over the decades (e.g. ARNOLD-FORSTER 1999: 24-6).

Uncertainty as to ownership

A further problem complicating the situation is the lack of clarity about ownership of many university collections (e.g. DRYSDALE 1990: 35). Not only does this bring ethical problems in relation to spoliation, looting and the illicit trade, it can also make issues such as loans and remedial conservation difficult, and again may make the collections vulnerable to reclaim or transfer.

Lack of training and staff development

The final theme relates to the isolation of many of those working in the university museum sector. Often those in charge of collections carry out these duties alongside other ones, such as teaching or technical work, and they are usually completely isolated from the museum profession as a whole, and perhaps from collections-based colleagues elsewhere in the university. Indeed, many of those with collections responsibilities would not consider themselves to be part of the museums profession, and lack formal training in museum skills. This in turn can lead to some of the problems in areas such as collections management that have been mentioned earlier.

Positive developments

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, the greater part of this sector consists of smaller collections and thus their problems tend to dominate the surveys. However, this dominance masks considerable progress in many areas.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments of the last decade has been that several universities have in fact been giving careful thought to the role and purpose of their museums and collections. Interestingly, for some universities, possession of collections seems still to be considered as an important aspect of being a higher education institution, whether the collections are for teaching, research or the public. Many of the newest universities, established out of former polytechnics, have actively sought to establish new collections. For example, the Southampton Institute has established a teaching collection for its Fine Arts Valuation course, and has acquired an Animation Research Archive for film animation (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1999: 23-4). Clearly for some universities, collections are still seen to be assets, not just liabilities.

Just as importantly, many universities have developed a role for their museums as shop windows or gateways for the university, a role for which they are well suited.

It has sometimes been argued, by university museum directors, that they have little remit to serve the wider public because their main aim is to serve staff and students of the university and other tertiary education users. However, this view is gradually changing as universities become more conscious of their need to play a role in the wider community in order to maintain their position (BENNETT *et al.* 1999). In particular in the UK, there is pressure on some universities to ensure that they 'widen participation' in tertiary education by recruiting a balanced proportion of students from state schools. This means getting out into the community and encouraging able school pupils to apply. HEMGCs are increasingly being used in this role by some universities. The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow have been acclaimed for their successful development of a more high profile role as a showcase for the University of

Glasgow. In Oxford, one museum director quoted in the survey said that 'my mandate from the university is to open up the museum as a window between the university and the community' (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1999: 34).

A recent initiative that some university museums in England have been able to take advantage of is the 'Widening Participation' initiative funded by HEFCE — the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Under this scheme, universities which do not attract able students from a wide social spectrum, can bid for funds to develop strategies for recruiting students from a wider range of social backgrounds. Manchester Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, and the museums of University College London have successfully argued that they can play a role in this process. At UCL, for example, an Education and Access Officer has been appointed, whose role it is to undertake outreach work in local schools with handling collections, which meets their curriculum needs and also introduces them to what a university is. There will be corresponding 'in-reach' when pupils and their parents are invited to visit the university.
UCL is also in the process of designing and raising funds for a new building to house, amongst other things, its Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. This building, named the Panopticon, will be aimed at opening up the university's campus, its collections, and the research work undertaken inside, to a wide public audience.

A major factor in these sorts of initiatives has been the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which provides funding, principally for capital projects, particularly those which promote access. This has enabled some universities to provide significantly enhanced services for the public and for students. Swansea University, in Wales, for example, received funding from the HLF and the European Regional Development Fund to build a new museum, the Egypt Centre, next to its arts centre at the heart of the campus, and established new posts of curator and assistant curator (COUNCIL FOR MUSEUMS IN WALES 2000: 13). The Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture as the University of Middlesex in London was similarly opened last year with HLF funding, providing greatly enhanced access to its collections.

It is perhaps in the area of access that most progress has generally been made. Some of the major

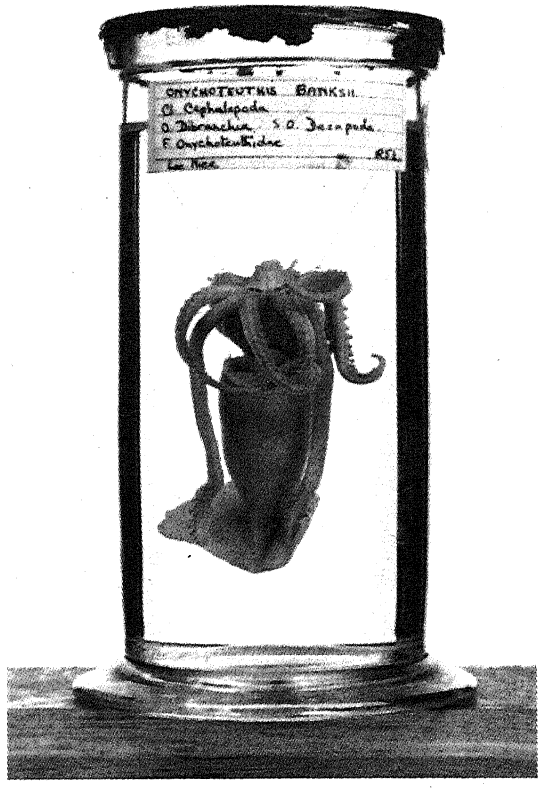

Fig. 2 - Conservation problems in university museums. In the case of this cephalopod specimen, the fluid requires topping up, and the sealant for the jar requires making good (Photo courtesy Grant Museum of Zoology, UCL).

museums, such as the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, are investing in new education wings, and others are investing in people to provide access. Four Cambridge University Museums have come together to appoint an outreach officer, again with HLF funding, to work with local schools and communities. The Barber Institute at Birmingham University, and the Rural History Centre at Reading University, have both appointed schools liaison or outreach officers, and in the former case, greatly developed market research and marketing activities (ARNOLD-FORSTER & WEEKS 2000: 22).

Smaller collections are developing access, particularly through the use of digitisation. If there is one area where universities have an advantage over other kinds of museums, it is in the area of information and communication technology, and some university museum websites are the best of their kind. The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London, for example, is developing a full on-line illustrated catalogue of all 80,000 objects in its collection, and plans to create a virtual museum linking all of the other Egyptian material excavated by Petrie scattered around the world, starting with a specific link-up with the Manchester Museum for the finds from the site of Lahun which are held in both museums (MACDONALD 2000). At the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, it is possible to see 'object movies' of prehistoric carved stone artefacts — by clicking on the object it can be made to rotate so that all sides and angles can be seen.

Many museums have moved beyond the object to use the Internet to create a virtual information resource. At the Museum of Antiquities of the University of Newcastle, it is possible to see a 'virtual exhibition' about Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers, enter the Hadrian's Wall education website, and explore the museum's recreated temple to Mithras three-dimensionally by moving around the room and clicking on elements of interest, and see the results of a community project with a local school (MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES WEBSITE 2001).

Other university museums have focussed on what they do which is distinctive to them as university museums. For some, this means the notion of an academic freedom to experiment, take risks and be challenging. The Courtauld Art Gallery in London, for example, attempts to do this with its temporary exhibition programme, which has included a display on 'Valuing Art' which invited visitors to guess the prices of paintings and other works of art and then explained how the art market worked (ref to catalogue). At the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, a temporary display of works from the modern collection was mounted, which instead of providing traditional art-historical labels, used captions which asked the kinds of questions asked by the general public, such as 'Why Can't I Make Out What's Happening In This Picture?' (SIMPSON 1997).

One area where success seems to be gaining ground is in that of collaboration and resource-sharing, which clearly makes a great deal of sense when resources are scarce. For example, the Oxford Conservation Consortium operates amongst a group of Oxford colleges to provide paper conservation services through sharing the same freelance conservation, which provides common standards and a systematic approach (ARNOLD-FORSTER 1999: 26).

Such collaboration is facilitated by the appointment in a number of universities, following recommendations made in the surveys, of an overall curator of university collections. Sometimes this

person assumes responsibility for all of the museums and collections in the university, as has happened at UCL, and sometimes they assume responsibility for the 'orphan' collections which exist alongside the main museums, as has been the case at Birmingham University (HAMILTON 1995).

Despite a general picture of isolation and lack of funds amongst the majority of small collections, good progress has also been made in some areas of support for university museums and collections. Two years ago, the University Museums Group changed its constitution to admit anyone involved in curating university museums and collections, which has resulted in expanded membership and a proper voice for small collections. Importantly too, the AHRB has announced an annual project fund of £250,000 to help smaller collections not core-funded by itself, to improve their standards, particularly with a view to applying for official registration as museums.

Conclusion and priorities for the future

Overall, the last decade of surveys of HEMGCs in the UK has revealed a fairly common picture of low standards and struggle for survival amongst the bulk of collections, alongside excellent development and initiatives to improve standards and widen access amongst others. It is clear that there is a huge gulf between the *museums*, which are open to the public and have the resources and momentum to move forward, and the *collections*, which struggle simply to survive. This in turn begs the question of whether university museums and collections might be subject to slightly different kinds of analysis. The former can be analysed alongside other kinds of public museums, while the latter may be more akin to the collections of research materials such as archives. It may be impossible to apply common policies to the whole of the HEMGC sector.

The surveys also set out priorities for the future for each of the regions they cover, which can be summarised as follows:

- Establish clear purpose and goals for HEMGCs within each university
- Develop clear constitutional arrangements for them
- Clarify the legal status and title of collections
- Appoint individuals who are responsible, on a full-time basis for all of the collections
- Develop forward plans, and policies on acquisitions, disposals and loans
- Prioritise collections management and access
- Develop the use of the Internet as a tool for access
- Provide dedicated budgets for individual collections
- Formalise links between the main university museum (if one exists) and the departmental collections
- Develop the role of the museum as a 'shop window' for current research within the university, and for widening student participation.
- Encourage greater collaboration and networking – develop regional partnerships
- Encourage more HEMGC to apply for registration as museums
- Undertake structured programmes of staff training and career development
- Encourage UMG (for the UK) and UMAC (internationally) to develop their roles as voices for the sector
- Develop an advocacy document from the existing surveys, to include a strategy for partnerships with government, museum agencies, etc.

It is clear that there is still a huge amount of work to be done in HEMGCs, from simply ensuring that

important collections survive intact into the future, to promoting wider access and use to them. It is evident that the sector is grossly under-resourced, and this under-funding must be tackled at the highest levels, by government departments responsible both for higher education and for heritage in general.

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